



# Air Force Personnel Recovery as a Service Core Function

It's Not "Your Father's Combat Search and Rescue"

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After 50 collective years in and around the superb community of rescue Airmen, both authors have experienced and witnessed the boundless passion for saving lives—a passion that motivates the uniquely skilled Airmen of personnel recovery (PR) to endure great sacrifices for others during peace and war across the globe. It remains a privilege and true honor to personally know most of the selfless and amazing Airmen who share a zeal for a principle conveyed by the rescue motto "These things we do, that others may live." Stories abound of gallant heroes performing astonishing acts to save just one life, leaving an indelible mark on the hearts of those who benefit personally or operationally from the effects produced by one of our nation's moral imperatives. Legendary Airmen such as A1C William Pitsenbarger, recipient of the Medal of Honor, and SrA Jason Cunningham, recipient of the Air Force Cross, along with others who anonymously risk life and limb, put themselves in harm's way to save someone else. In light of such a legacy of sacrifice and heroism, why do so few people outside the rescue community understand the tremendous value that PR brings and will bring to America's current and future fights? The answer is simple: many individuals across the Department of Defense (DOD), Airmen included,

remain unaware of "these things we do," failing to appreciate sufficiently the complexities of PR and therefore not understanding that it is most certainly not "your father's combat search and rescue (CSAR)."

Why is an understanding of "these things we do" vital to the future of Air Force PR and, in turn, Air Force rescue? First, leaders who wish to effectively employ this highly demanded military capability must recognize and leverage it in combination with other joint capabilities. This involves choosing the best means of operationally posturing fielded forces to benefit from PR should an isolating event occur, preparing potential customers who are deploying to hostile locations so they can maximize the chances of conducting a successful rescue mission, and supporting developments in PR capabilities such as integrated command and control systems, modern rescue platforms, and jointly accepted tactics, techniques, and procedures. Second, leaders and customers who fully comprehend Air Force PR are more likely to advocate our needs successfully at the highest levels, seek our expertise early in both strategic and operational planning, and effectively cooperate for expedient recovery when a teammate becomes isolated in either permissive or hostile environments.

How do we promote sufficient awareness of PR across the Air Force and the rest of the

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DOD? We begin by ensuring PR's inclusion in the architecture of the service core functions and by having a core function master plan. Should this architecture exclude an essential function like PR, recovery's capabilities would decline as the other functions more productively compete for resources. Furthermore, this lack of institutional visibility would result in service, joint, and coalition partners failing to understand a particular capability, inappropriately comprehending its full value across the range of military operations (ROMO), and ineffectively advocating for resources to match requirements set by combatant commanders. Consequently, in 2009 Michael B. Donley, secretary of the Air Force, and Gen Norton A. Schwartz, Air Force chief of staff, added PR to the list of Air Force core functions.<sup>1</sup> In turn, Robert M. Gates, former secretary of defense, agreed with their decision by approving DOD Directive 5100.01, *Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components*, the policy document that codifies Air Force core functions and those of our fellow services.<sup>2</sup> This designation allows senior leaders to promulgate essential PR concepts and practices to the joint community, standardizing interaction among PR experts and the customers we serve. Furthermore, the Air Force and others in the DOD can direct forces to integrate training specific to PR, thus enhancing comprehension and effective implementation of recovery across the ROMO and maximizing usage of this life-saving Air Force core function during each phase of any military operation.

However, because PR—as a service core function—systematically encapsulates “these things we do,” some people at times have difficulty truly comprehending and fully understanding its expansive nature. PR spans the fundamental war-fighting requirement to prepare, plan, execute, and adapt. It encompasses survival and captivity training conducted at Lackland AFB, Texas; Fairchild AFB, Washington; and the Air Force Academy, Colorado; as well as large-force rescue exercises flown at Red Flag and Angel Thunder, together with PR education and command and control training available at Hurlburt

Field, Florida, for senior commanders and the staffs of their air operations centers.<sup>3</sup> Although many Air Force personnel, along with those of joint and coalition partners, receive some aspects of training under PR and rely upon our capabilities in crises, most of them still do not completely grasp PR as a service core function—a fact that generates misunderstanding of PR-unique terminology, operational concepts, and practices. Ultimately, this situation jeopardizes our ability to fully integrate life-saving PR early in the mission-planning process. Conceptual misunderstandings accumulate over time, serving to limit users' knowledge of what PR can do for them. Terms such as *search and rescue*, *combat search and rescue*, *medical evacuation*, *casualty evacuation*, and *sea rescue*, to name just a few, give users the impression that PR rescues aircrews only or, worse, that we are neither available nor postured to rescue joint, coalition, or even civilian partners during an isolating event. We want our leaders and customers to understand fully what PR encompasses rather than rely on dated expressions to incorrectly characterize our specialized capabilities and unique life-saving skills.

Under PR, the ability to recover downed pilots remains the hallmark of the rescue Airman. Having such a high-end capability ensures flexibility in fulfilling the rescue mission across the ROMO. For the brave men and women who answer that call, it is a way of life like no other. An examination of that legacy from the jungles of Vietnam, and even before, confirms the fact that rescue Airmen save lives, regardless of the risk to themselves. Such commitment instills trust in others that “someone will come.” It also complicates the decision cycles of our adversaries. These facts are as true today as they ever were. But saving a life is the effect—one that can occur across the ROMO, not just during major combat operations. In order to truly appreciate the full range of capability that today's rescue Airmen bring to the fight under the PR service core function, one must think far beyond the notion that Air Force PR exists only to sit alert in some austere environment, launch a rescue helicop-



ter into contested territory, and return a fellow pilot to safety. In that context, *PR* is not simply a new abbreviation for *CSAR*. Perhaps this is why rescue Airmen, past and present, were delighted when our Air Force recognized the importance of the rescue mission by including *PR* among the service core functions. Nevertheless, even though *PR* has enjoyed this designation for two years, not every Airman—as well as some rescue Airmen—understands the significance.

At this point, reviewing the meanings of the terms *service*, *core*, and *function* might prove beneficial to all Airmen. A standard English dictionary defines the noun *service* as “the occupation or function of serving, or in active service.” Clearly, all of us who wear the cloth of our nation, even our civilian Airmen, share this bond. The definition of the noun/attributive *core*—“a central and often foundational part” or “a basic, essential, or enduring part”—points to our deepest rooted convictions about who we are and what we stand for, those ideas that shape our guiding principles, opinions, and beliefs. These elements comprise our “DNA.” Last, the noun *function* is “the action for which a person or thing is specially fitted or used or for which a thing exists.” We Airmen are “specially fitted” for the missions we perform every day—in particular, for those designated as service core functions.

The Air Force designed the list of service core functions to support its essential mission areas—those that truly reflect both the DNA of Airmen and what it means to be an air, space, and cyberspace warrior. Broadly defined, our service core functions attempt to describe and fulfill the strategic objectives found in both the national defense and national military strategies.<sup>4</sup> The formula for understanding what a service core function encapsulates is simple: winning effects = purpose + mission + capabilities (systems and skills) required for success. Each service core function is accompanied by a list of underlying elements intended to tie that function to specific missions and tasks carried out by Air Force units. Service core functions go well beyond what we Airmen

consider important. They speak to our unique contributions to the joint cause and the need to achieve war-fighting effectiveness. Any service that seeks war-fighting independence instead of embracing interdependence serves only to reduce war-fighting effectiveness and increase the likelihood of costly redundancies and capability gaps. The last thing we need to do is turn back the clock by allowing services to develop excessively redundant capabilities, thereby rejecting the premise of joint war fighting. It is imperative that services build the right mix of people, systems, and infrastructure underlying their core competencies and functions.<sup>5</sup>

Armed with this understanding, one might assume that everyone knows the high-order significance of having *PR* listed among other Air Force core functions. However, many individuals both within and without the rescue community have lazily thrown around such terms as *PR mission*, *PR forces*, and *CSAR* when the enterprise should in fact refer to itself as the *PR service core function*. Failure to do so affects how members of other Air Force communities (e.g., fighter; bomber; special operations forces; and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance [ISR]) view the value of both *PR* as a core function and rescue as a mission. This situation has a detrimental effect on how other core functions become interconnected and mutually supportive during all facets of preparation, planning, execution, and adaptation.

Although Airmen recognize and members of our sister services widely comprehend the functional concepts behind most of the Air Force’s core functions (e.g., global precision attack, air superiority, nuclear deterrence operations, command and control, global integrated ISR, etc.), *PR* falls short. Yet, every Airman should have at least a baseline understanding of everything essential to our service, which now includes *PR*. This requirement accords with our service’s solemn responsibility to organize, train, and equip our Airmen throughout the preparation-planning-execution-adaptation continuum. Doing so will meet the *PR* policies and de-

mands set forth by our national leaders and combatant commanders.

Recalling our formula for what a service core function encompasses (winning effects = purpose + mission + capabilities [systems and skills] required), we can now put PR to the test. First, in terms of *winning effects*, PR protects human capital and denies an adversary the operational and strategic advantages of exploitation. Second, PR exists for the *purpose* of saving lives and supporting people who must struggle to survive, evade capture, resist exploitation, and escape when necessary. Third, PR performs the rescue *mission* by finding individuals, getting them out of trouble, returning them to safety, and rendering medical care as required. Fourth, *capabilities* include the systems and skills necessary to run through the “save chain’s” five critical tasks rapidly and successfully: report, locate, support, recover, and reintegrate individuals forced to survive, evade capture, resist exploitation, and escape.

The specific weapon systems currently apportioned and tasked to deliver PR effects and perform the rescue mission include the HH-60G helicopter, the HC-130N/P aircraft, and Guardian Angel (consisting of combat rescue officers, pararescuemen, and survival-evasion-resistance-escape specialists). In and of themselves, these systems do not complete the save chain, which requires additional systems typically provided under other core functions specifically designed and tasked to carry out the air-to-air mission (under the air superiority core function), the interdiction and close air support missions (under the global precision attack core function), the ISR mission (under the global integrated ISR core function), medical care support (under the agile combat support core function), command and control for air/space/cyber (under the command and control core function), and other specialized capabilities (under the special operations core function). Complementing these systems are intellectual and practiced skills characteristic of three separate yet related areas: rescue forces, commanders and their staffs, and people at risk of becoming isolated. During a rescue mission, those skills

are core to an Airman’s practiced ability to fly aircraft, run a hoist, deliver survival rafts while airborne, call for suppressive fire, parachute, air-refuel, maintain aircraft, employ weapons, collect and disseminate intelligence, transfer knowledge, survive, evade capture, resist exploitation, escape, and so on. All of this accurately depicts PR—they are “these things we do.” Clearly then, describing PR simply as a mission or event involving a helicopter picking up a downed pilot behind enemy lines is an understatement.

In this context, every Airman plays a part within the greater PR service core function. More specifically, Airmen placed in harm’s way need to prepare for becoming isolated. The Air Force’s current posture statement indicates that “the United States faces diverse and complex security challenges that require a range of agile and flexible combat capabilities” as well as effects designed to win.<sup>6</sup> Our service is fully engaged in this effort, and PR is making a vital contribution. Given the ongoing issues confronting us worldwide, Airmen stand at the forefront of the joint arena, providing combat air, space, and cyber power in a host of dangerous environments. More than ever before, Airmen of all disciplines find themselves in situations outside safe confines and in places where circumstances might forcibly separate them from friendly control. Therefore, because Airmen may become “customers” of what the PR service core function brings to the fight, they must understand the capabilities and effects that recovery brings to bear. Additionally, as noted by the posture statement, “the increased utilization of military and civilian personnel in support of [overseas contingency operations] has significantly increased the demand for Air Force rescue forces beyond the conventional combat search and rescue mission.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, all Airmen, commanders included, are responsible for applying their unique capabilities (systems and skills) to support a rescue mission across the ROMO—not just during combat.

Air Force PR is indeed a core function of airpower, validated by the fact that, in to-



day's fight, Airmen trained in the true art of recovery can readily adapt and innovatively support every contingency operation, including those in the homeland. Our service's PR, which embodies an integrated and systematic approach to blending interdependent capabilities expected to save the lives of people forced to survive or evade capture, remains fully applied in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Horn of Africa. It is also ingrained in the support that our nation offers during land and maritime search and rescue, humanitarian assistance / disaster relief, and mass-casualty evacuation operations either at home or around the globe. Surprisingly, despite such success, some individuals—especially in the joint community and higher—continue to think of Air Force PR only in terms of flying helicopters and picking up pilots shot down behind enemy lines. In actuality, the PR service core function embraces every process, system, platform, and structure necessary for the Air Force to prepare its personnel in advance, plan for the rescue mission, execute the save chain's critical tasks, and adapt our programs and methods in a way that keeps America's PR observe-orient-decide-act loop tighter than anybody else's.

So where are we missing the mark? We need look no further than our collective inability to communicate accurately and consistently the full scope of PR as a service core function. We still fail to think and talk holistically in terms of individual preparation, operational planning, joint execution, and adaptation. It is easy to speak in terms of actually executing a rescue mission, picking up an isolated person here, supporting a noncombat evacuation operation there, leading rescue operations during national disaster X, and facilitating the development of partner-nation rescue crews in country Y. However, we must become equally adept at communicating all the other aspects of preparation, planning, execution, and adaptation as described by PR's operational concept and core function master plan. As a service, we experience victory when we can easily convey our knowledge and under-

standing of PR to the masses, especially joint military and interagency planners who assess the recovery needs of their leadership in the field. But we do not clearly communicate beyond the rescue helicopter and, on a good day, the HC-130 and Guardian Angel weapon systems. We must become proficient in accurately portraying the Air Force's ability to quickly run through the save chain, using nontraditional systems and platforms not specifically designed or intended to perform the rescue mission. Consequently, as Air Force PR continues to fly toward the future, leaders at all levels must be mindful of how best to guide this critical and necessarily inclusive service core function. PR is war fighting. It is a key ingredient in our nation's ability to win. It is a system-of-systems approach that addresses all aspects of preparation, planning, execution, and adaptation necessary in rescuing a human being. PR is much more than war-movie images of an HC-130 refueling an HH-60 so it can lower a pararescue-man on a hoist to snatch a downed pilot from near capture.

The Air Force took a significant step by recognizing PR as one of its service core functions. To enjoy true success, all Airmen, along with personnel in joint and interagency communities, must be aware of the evolved nature of warfare and of combatant commanders' escalating need for PR beyond the myopic notion of CSAR. With this demand comes a call for new and codified terminology, a vision that looks beyond historical paradigms, and a retooling of how the Air Force organizes, trains, equips, and employs its forces to give war fighters the PR they deserve. If we limit ourselves to thinking narrowly, PR's value to the nation will stagnate and eventually become irrelevant. So the next time Air Force PR comes to mind, try to move past medical evacuation, casualty evacuation, or a rescue mission with helicopters and an A-10 fighter escort, and realize that this service core function entails much more than "your father's CSAR." 🍀

## Notes

1. Department of the Air Force, *United States Air Force Posture Statement, 2009* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 19 May 2009), 3, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/af/posture2009.pdf>.

2. Department of Defense Directive 5100.01, *Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components*, 21 December 2010, <http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/510001p.pdf>.

3. Angel Thunder, a PR exercise sponsored by Air Combat Command that takes place at Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ, focuses on the application of recovery capabilities across the full range of military operations to support the whole-of-government response to isolated personnel.

4. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2008),

<http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2008nationaldefensestrategy.pdf>; and Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011), [http://www.jcs.mil/content/files/2011-02/020811084800\\_2011\\_NMS\\_-08\\_FEB\\_2011.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/content/files/2011-02/020811084800_2011_NMS_-08_FEB_2011.pdf).

5. Lt Gen David A. Deptula and Harold “Buck” Adams, “Joint’s True Meaning: Jointness Requires That Separate Services Focus on Core Competencies,” *Armed Forces Journal* 146, no. 10 (May 2009): 38–39.

6. Department of the Air Force, *United States Air Force Posture Statement, 2011* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 17 February 2011), 1, <http://www.posturestatement.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-110301-088.pdf>.

7. Ibid., 20.



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